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Carmarthen: Pothouse Wharf

Proposed Heritage Centre redevelopment at the wharfside .

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT FOR CARMARTHEN DISTRICT
COUNCIL

by

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Carmarthen: Pothouse Wharf

Proposed Redevelopment of site as Heritage centre.

Archaeological Assessment for Carmarthen District Council

1. Management Summary:

- 1.1 Carmarthen has maritime roots extending back at least to the Roman period, but the position of the town's Roman waterfront is unknown. Its medieval quays are thought to be centred around an island, which became Island Wharf. This lies immediately adjacent, upstream, centred on the present pumping station. What became Pothouse Wharf may thus have included part of the waterfront in the Middle Ages. The documentary evidence suggests that the area in question was not built upon until the later 19th century, when a series of quayside warehouses and a saw mill were constructed, fronting the former pottery which gave its name to the wharf. Prior to the construction of these buildings the area was used for ship building.

2. Historical Evidence

- 2.1 Knowledge of the Roman development of Carmarthen, based on excavations, has dramatically increased over the last 25 years (H. James, 1992). However the location of Roman quays which must have existed has defied all attempts to discover their whereabouts. What little can be said is that their location must be confined to the limit of ordinary tides. For this reason it is more likely that the Roman quays were near the present Quay than further up stream. Having said that, the position of the river in Roman times may have been so different to today's Towy, that the Roman quays might have been almost anywhere near the edge of the present floodplain.
- 2.2 The medieval waterfront is better understood, but knowledge is by no means complete (James, 1980, Chapter 4 and pp. 47-8). A stream, known in the Middle Ages as the Wynveth or Mill Brook, once bisected Carmarthen and this was conduited over when Blue Street was built early in the 1800s. At the mouth of this stream was a small island, and around this and up the Wynveth were medieval Carmarthen's wharfs. The appropriately-named Quay Street lead directly from it to the commercial hub of Carmarthen. The main buildings of the period were around a radiating network of roads outside a town gate at the south west end of Quay Street (see Speed's map, *ibid*, p.48). The

destruction of archaeological deposits in this area, first by the construction of Coracle Way in the 1960s and later by the construction of the Pumping Station means that we know little archaeologically about these quays and wharfs.

- 2.3 It is probable that the early quays were fronted with wood, although by 1547 there is a record of 40 shillings being bequeathed for the upkeep of the quay "yf it be done with lyme and stone"; and by 1580 the quay was to be repaired "both with lyme and stones and beams of timber". We must assume that the area in question is where the medieval quay was. In 1620 a lease refers to several docks, including Pill Dockett and Island Dock; and in 1691 we hear of the Little Key (?up the Wynveth brook) (CRO Corporation Order Books Museum 155).
- 2.4 The development of what is today known as The Quay is of more recent origin. By the 18th century the then quay was becoming too small to handle the increasing amount of traffic. In 1765 plans were discussed for extending the quay "by lengthening the same and erecting a wall from the dock at the west side there to the mill brook". £15 was voted to do this (ibid, fol. 24). This could be Pothouse Wharf. However by 1800 the Corporation raised a mortgage on its lands to erect *inter alia*, a ballast quay and in 1804 a Dry Dock was to be built, also at the Corporation's expense (ibid. fols. 318, 387). In 1807 Lady Mansel (who owned Island Wharf and all the land including Spring Gardens down to the water front) was asked to sell part of this "so as to enlarge the present quay" (ibid. fol. 383). A major phase of enlargement thus started in 1808-9 when the present quay was extended up to the bridge (ibid) and also downstream fronting Pothouse Wharf. In 1809 Lord Cawdor (the then mayor) gave the corporation "the Pitt and Quay, his property opposite the Three Mariners from the purpose of extending the Common Quay". I have failed to precisely locate the Three Mariners (it was somewhere about the Quay), but Cawdor owned property adjacent to Pothouse Wharf as well at the lower end of Quay Street (CRO 2/m 34). In 1811 a Dry Dock was being erected, which was soon under repair because it was leaking (CRO Museum 155, fol. 493). Where this Dry Dock was situated is uncertain, but its location could potentially be within the area of redevelopment.
- 2.5 Cartographic Evidence. Our knowledge of the chronological development of the quay outlined in 2.4 is gleaned almost wholly from non-map evidence. Carmarthen is fortunate in having an excellent run of accurate maps covering the Quay for the years 1786, 1834, 1839, 1850 and the OS maps of 1887, 1906 and 1936. All have been consulted for this Assessment. Unfortunately we have no maps that cover the many changes in the early 19th century (i.e. between the maps of 1786 and 1837). Because of this the precise alterations,

additions and their locations could be not ascertained without further in-depth documentary research, which is beyond the scope of this brief.

- 2.6 The other useful source of information is topographical prints, and for the later period photographs. The prints show activity, particularly ship building, not depicted on the maps. The combination of map and pictorial evidence shows the development of Pothouse Wharf as follows.
- 2.7 The earliest accurate map of Carmarthen, drawn in 1786 (of which three copies survive in Carmarthen Record Office, CRO Cawdor Map; CRO Morgan of Furnace Map; CRO Abstract map 2/M 34) shows the building known as the Pothouse. This building is called "Old Pottery" in later maps. The curtilage of the Pothouse runs down to the river bank. One map (CRO 2/M 34, Appendix Fig. 1) records in a later hand that the property belonged to Lord Milford. Although little research has ever been undertaken into the Pothouse, it is certain this was a pottery, and the curtilage in which it stood, known as Pentypark, included the waterfront. At that date there was no road running through it, traffic passed along the north side along Mill Street (then known as Dam Street). It also appears that in 1786 the only walling on the riverside was from the Island upstream; hachuring suggests that downstream of the Island (i.e. along Pothouse Wharf) the river bank sloped naturally down to the low-water mark. Nearly 50 years later John Wood's map of 1834 (Fig. 2) suggests that by then a new road passed between the Pothouse and its wharf to the south, and this is confirmed by the Tithe Map of 1839 (Fig. 3), for by this date the embryonic Sawmill Terrace was forming, with buildings off its north side (east of the Pothouse). Wood's map records "Pot House Quay" for the area of interest in this study. Also by this date more buildings appear on the Island (which only had Island House in 1786). The increased number of buildings reflects what is known about the expansion of the Quay from documentary sources. Part of that expansion included the construction of Blue Street (and Red Street) - a completely new thoroughfare linking the New Market with the Quay. (This is covered in some detail in my *Carmarthen: an Archaeological and Topographical survey*, pp. 51-2). Neither of the two maps of the 1830s appear to distinguish *walls* from normal river *banks*, but a large scale "Original Plan of Carmarthen" (Fig. 4) of 1850 does, and clearly defines the wall of Pothouse Wharf protruding into the river with a set of steps at one point. This protrusion is also shown in the 1:500 scale OS map of 1877, along with a number of mooring posts (Fig. 5). At the eastern end of the site a Saw Mill had been constructed (i.e. between 1850 and 1877), along with a row of terraced cottages (Sawmill Terrace). By this date the Pot House had also undergone a change of use, as it is recorded as "Towy Tin Japan & Galvanized Works".

2.8 The late 19th and early 20th century saw numerous buildings being added to Pothouse Wharf. Comparison of the OS maps of 1877 and 1906 (Fig. 5, & 6) shows that a number of wharf-side buildings had been constructed, and these are also to be seen in early photographs. On the downstream end of the wharf (adjacent to the present slipway) were three parallel corrugated and oval-roofed warehouses. Up stream of these was a pitch-roofed warehouse and other buildings. As well as the saw mill near Island Wharf; another was built down stream of Pothouse Wharf, occupying the land on the other side of the present slipway. In 1905 two of the corrugated-iron warehouses were demolished (one wholly, the other only partly), to make way for the construction of a 4-story warehouse for the Western Counties Agricultural Cooperative (the WCA building) (Fig. 7). This was built of reinforced concrete to a revolutionary design by French architects, and was demolished by the Council in 1979. It was said to be structurally unsound, although press reports at the time record that the demolition contractor had great difficulty in bringing it to the ground. Since 1979 the area has remained open ground and used for car and lorry parking. The degree of below ground disturbance and in-filling during demolition is unknown.

2.9 Ship Building. The majority of the area of Pothouse Wharf appears open and unbuilt on in the map evidence which goes back to 1786. However we know that this area was used for shipbuilding from at least that date, and this is confirmed by Cox's engraving of c. 1830 (Fig. 8). In the left foreground is a fairly large unfinished hull (with the double-piled Pothouse seen beyond its bow). To the right of this are numerous smaller craft either under construction or repair, and there are two bluff-bowed ketches tied up on the wharf. Another print (thought to be c. 1850 (Fig. 9)) shows a paddle steamer in the river. The ribs of a boat under construction is shown apparently at or just below Island Wharf, and the ground around Pothouse Wharf is littered with what I presume to be stacks of seasoning timber, and stocks - typical of a yard for building timber ships. The wall of Pothouse Wharf can also be clearly seen in this print.

2.10 Some idea of the intensity of shipbuilding in the area can be gauged by Spurrell's *Carmarthen and its neighbourhood* (1879, p. 28) which records:

Shipbuilding . . . formerly carried on here to a considerable extent, half-a-dozen vessels of different sizes and in different stages of construction being sometimes on the stocks at the same time, has ceased since the introduction of steam and iron . . .

- 2.11 The area is very likely to have been used for shipbuilding from much earlier times, although no records have been found for this. There are many records (mainly 19th century) of ships being launched at this point, some of which were employed carrying emigrants out to the New World and bringing timber back (see James, 1983). The largest vessel built at Pothouse Wharf (in 1841), was the *Princess Royal* (3 masts 99 ft x 23.9 x 16.1 ft 332 tons OM).
- 2.12 The infrastructure of the area and surrounding streets revolved around the servicing of ship building, chandlery, rope making and the import and export of goods. Thus the many saw mills furnished raw materials for ship building; but ships also imported wood to these mills from the New World and Scandinavia to satisfy the needs of the town and surrounding district. A number of foundries were also located in Blue Street, where iron fastenings, implements, etc were manufactured.

3. Below Ground Deposits.

- 3.1 In 1976 the buildings on the adjacent Island Wharf were demolished and the present sewage pumping station erected. The method of construction was deep piling, and the area was then excavated to a considerable depth exposing the cast piles. No prior archaeological investigation was undertaken. A salvage watching brief noted deep archaeological deposits, which were obliterated by the destructive method of construction. The considerable depth of deposit in this area probably related to the fact that the pump house is built over the water course of the Mill Stream surrounding the Island.
- 3.2 The ground under Pothouse Wharf is likely to be significantly different. However, what we cannot know is the distance the stone quay wall has been built out into the river, leaving any possible earlier timber wharfs further back and buried. This should be remembered when positioning the proposed building. The survival of timber shipyard structures and slips is also possible, although the level from which ship building took place must be above the height of spring tides, and therefore cannot be much lower than the present ground surface. So the archaeological evidence for ship building may have been lost or severely damaged during the construction and subsequent demolition of the late 19th and early 20th century warehouses. It should be observed, however, that in a tidal location such as this, with a high salt-water table, timber preservation is likely to be very good. The former position of the Pothouse itself (under the dual carriageway) is too far north of the area proposed for redevelopment. This evidence for pottery manufacture is unlikely to be contained under Pothouse Wharf.

3.3 Borehole Profiles At the date of submission of this report the borehole profiles were not available for comment.

4. Bibliography

Terrence James (1980) *Carmarthen: an Archaeological and Topographical Survey*.

Terrence James (1983) 'The logbook of the Brig *Priscilla* of Carmarthen, April to October, 1820', *Carmarthenshire Antiquary* XIX, pp. 43-52.

Heather James (1992) 'Excavations in Roman Carmarthen 1978-1990', *Carmarthenshire Antiquary* XXVIII, pp. 5-36.

T.A.James, 8 December 1993

5. Appendix: Maps, Prints and Photographs

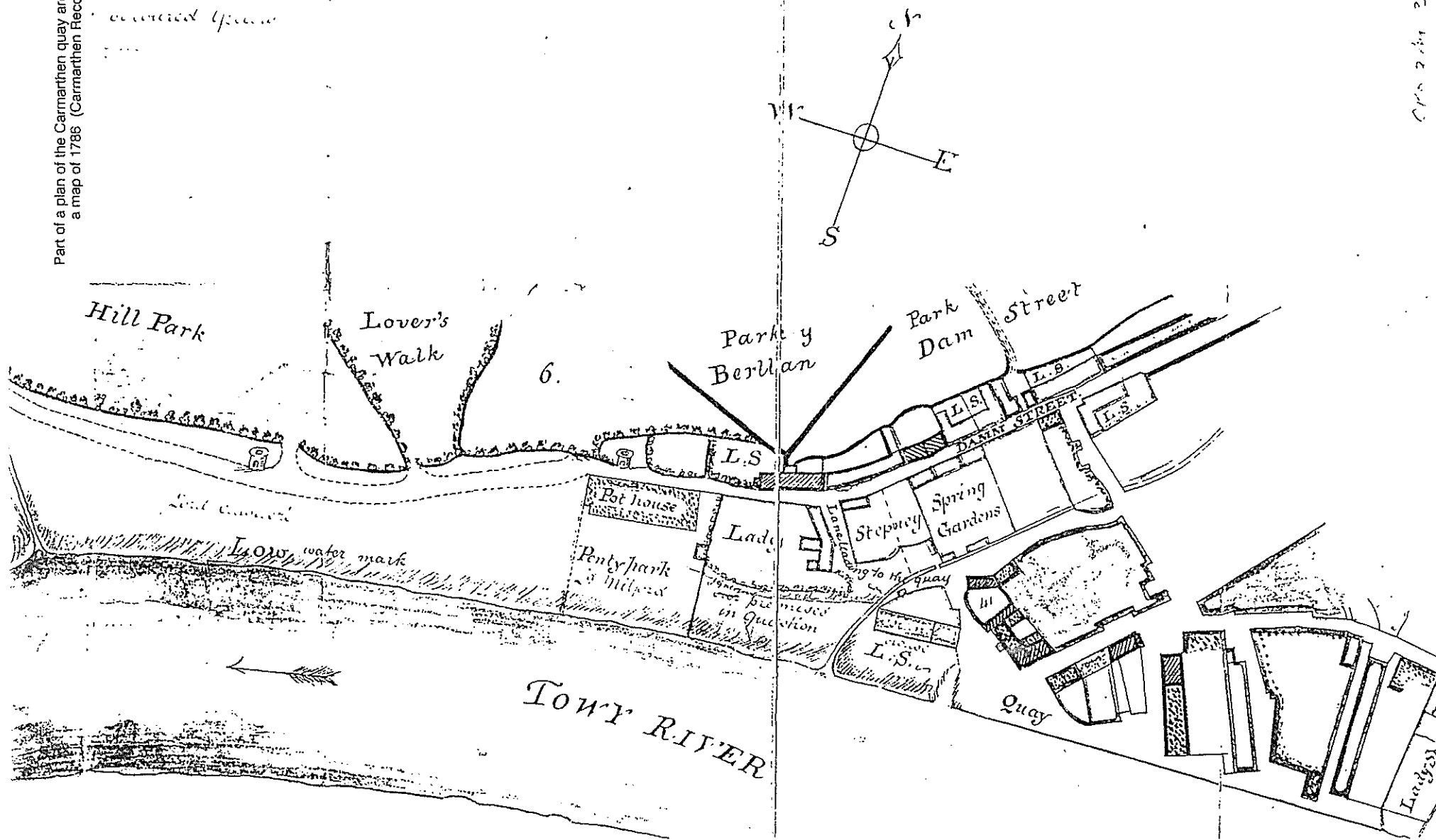
1

Part of a plan of the Carmarthen quay area extracted from a map of 1786 (Carmarthen Record Office 2/M 34)

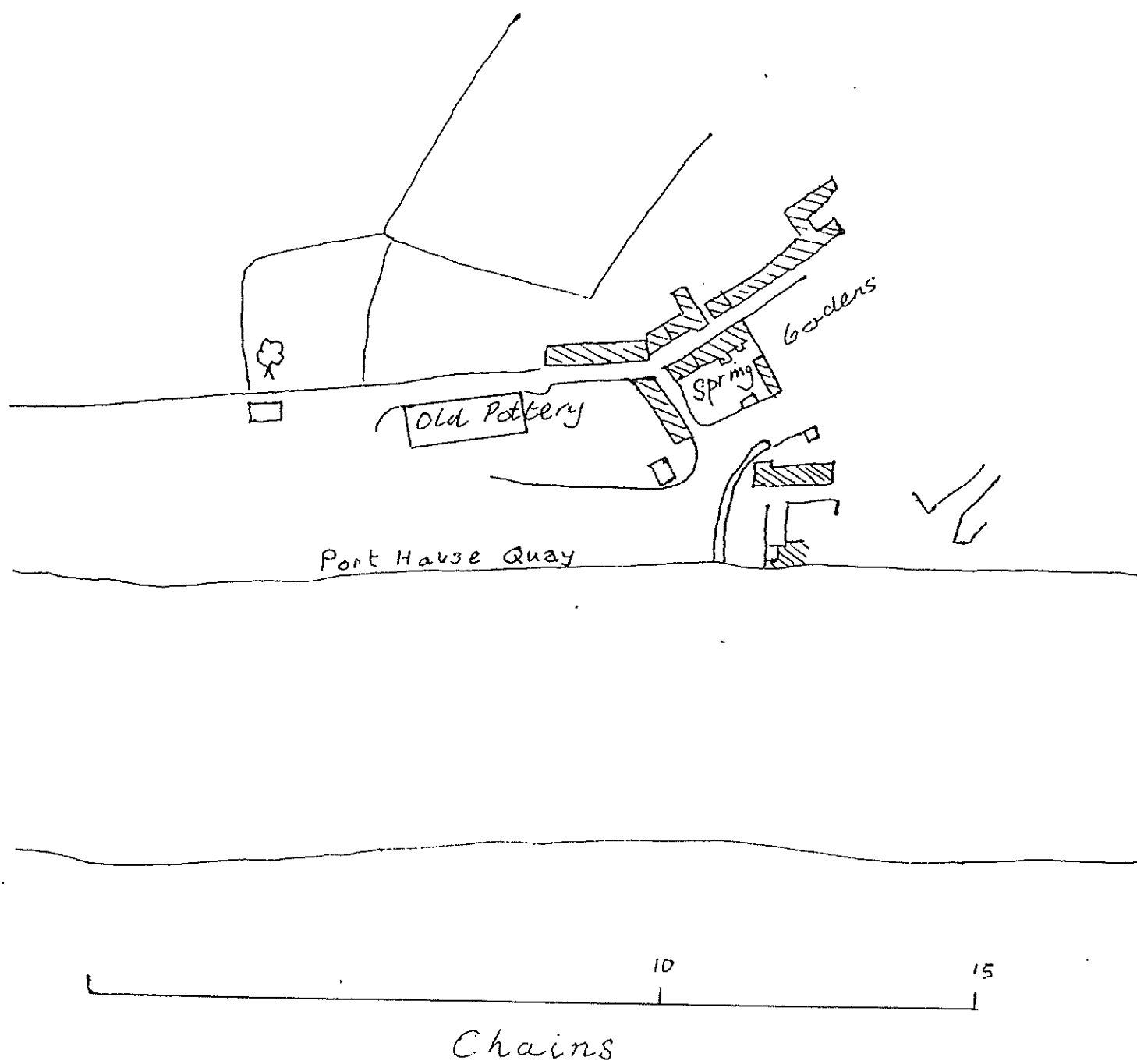
... and situated in the County Borough town of Carmarthen.
 being a particular Survey & Description made in the year 1786 by T Lewis Surveyor.
 for John Vaughan Esq^r of Golden Grove.

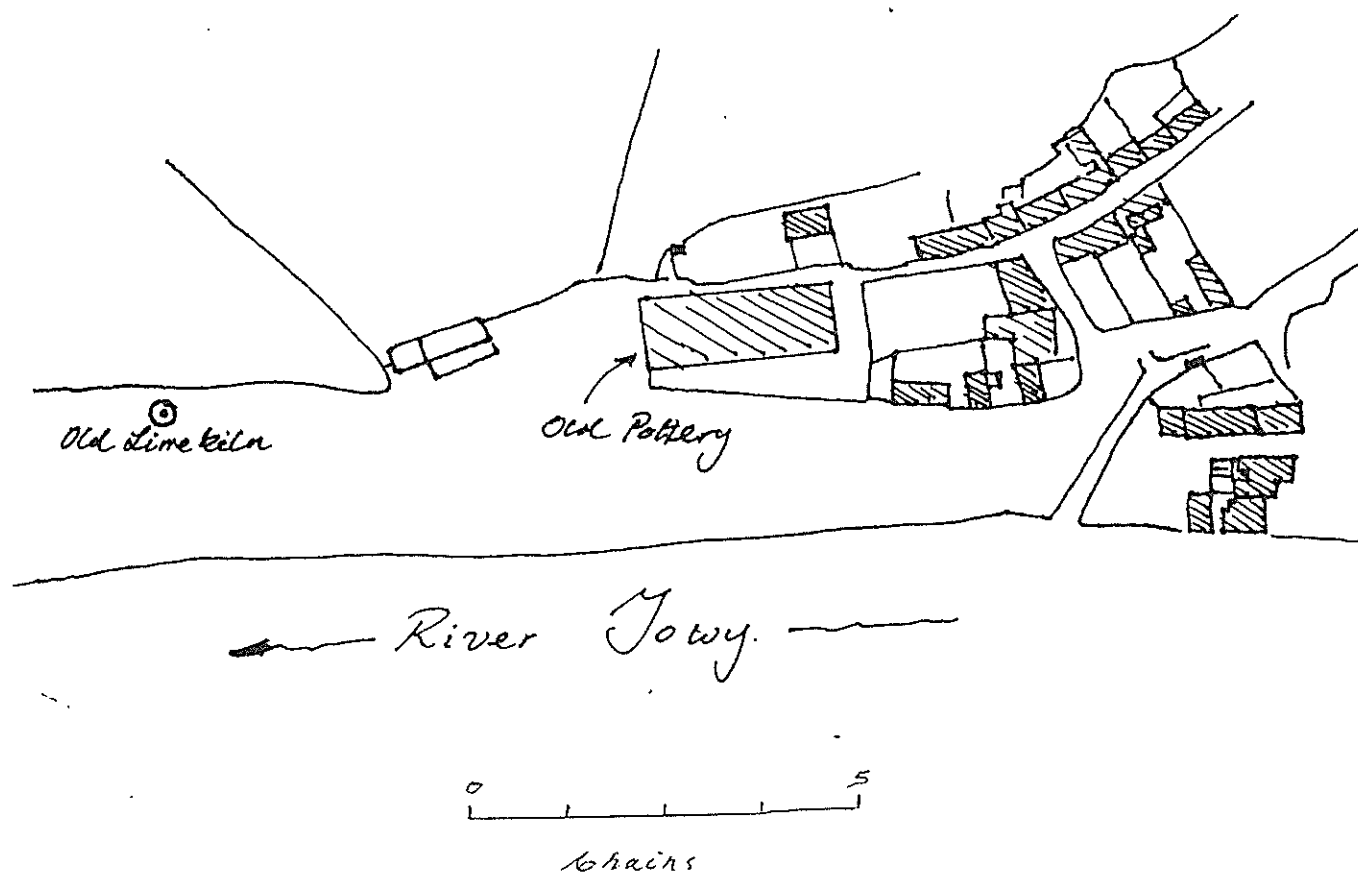
CARMARTHENSHIRE
 ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY
 & FIELD CLUB

CRS 2/34 24



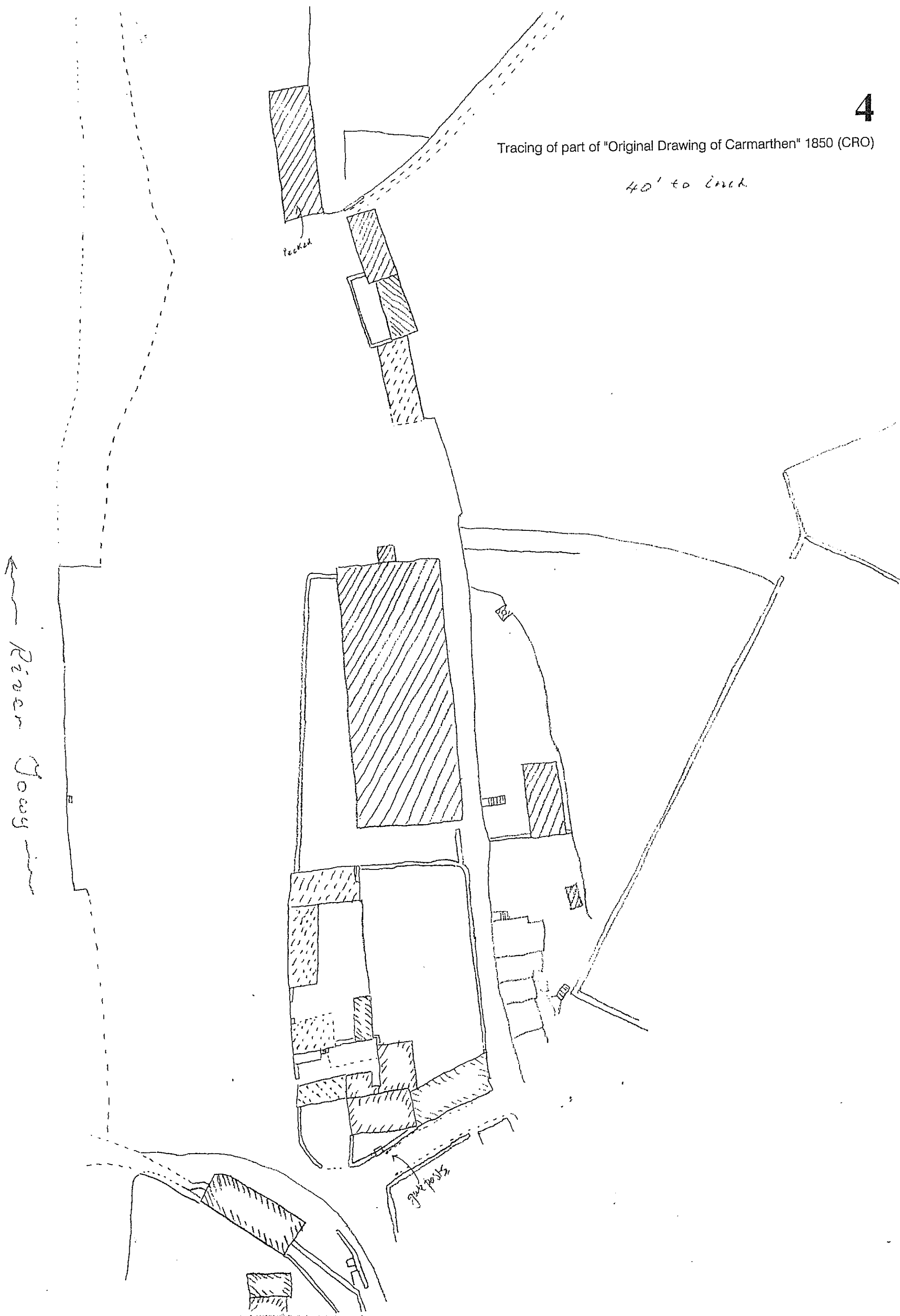
Tracing of part of John Wood's Map 1834 (CR

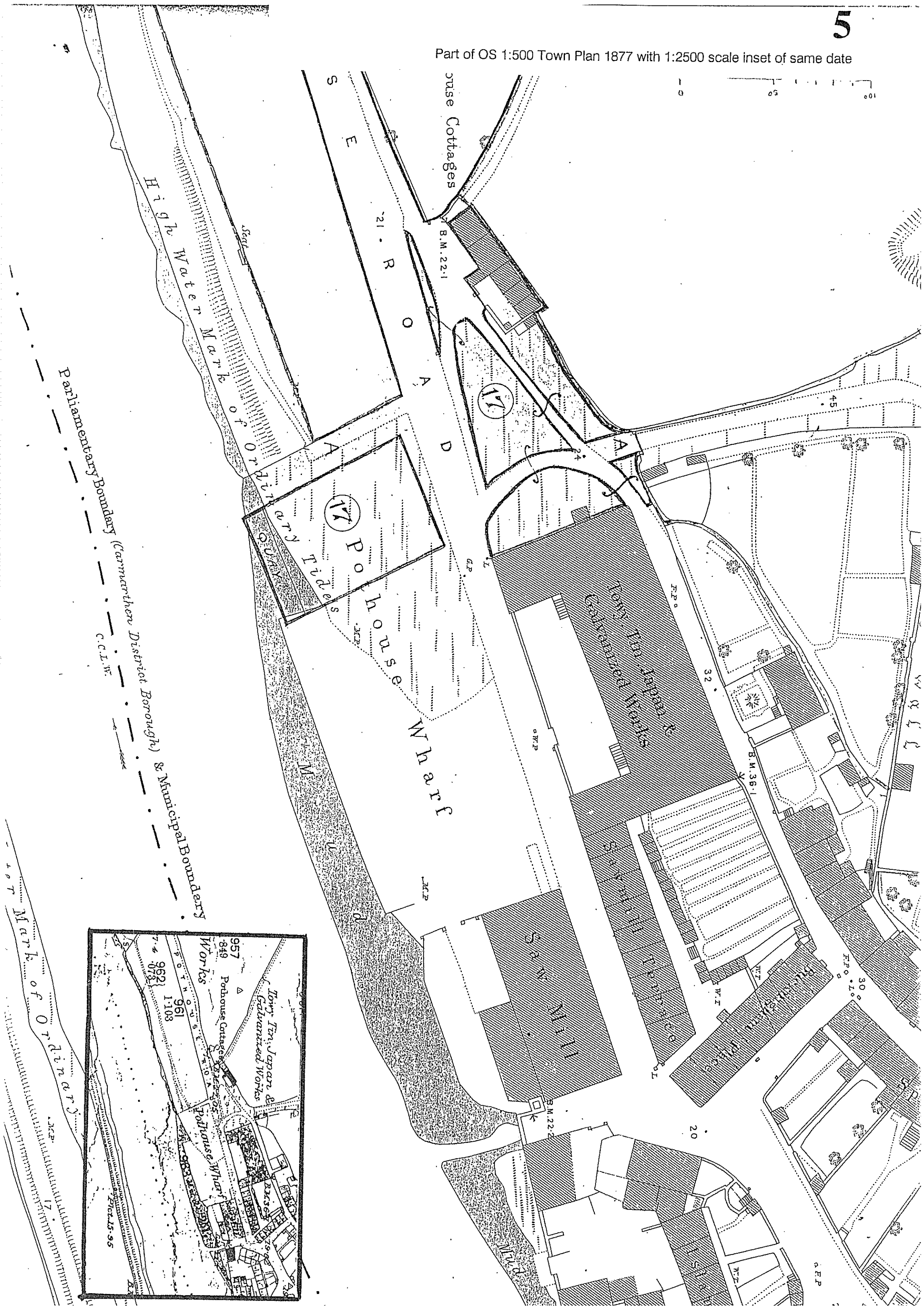
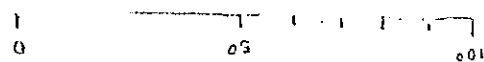




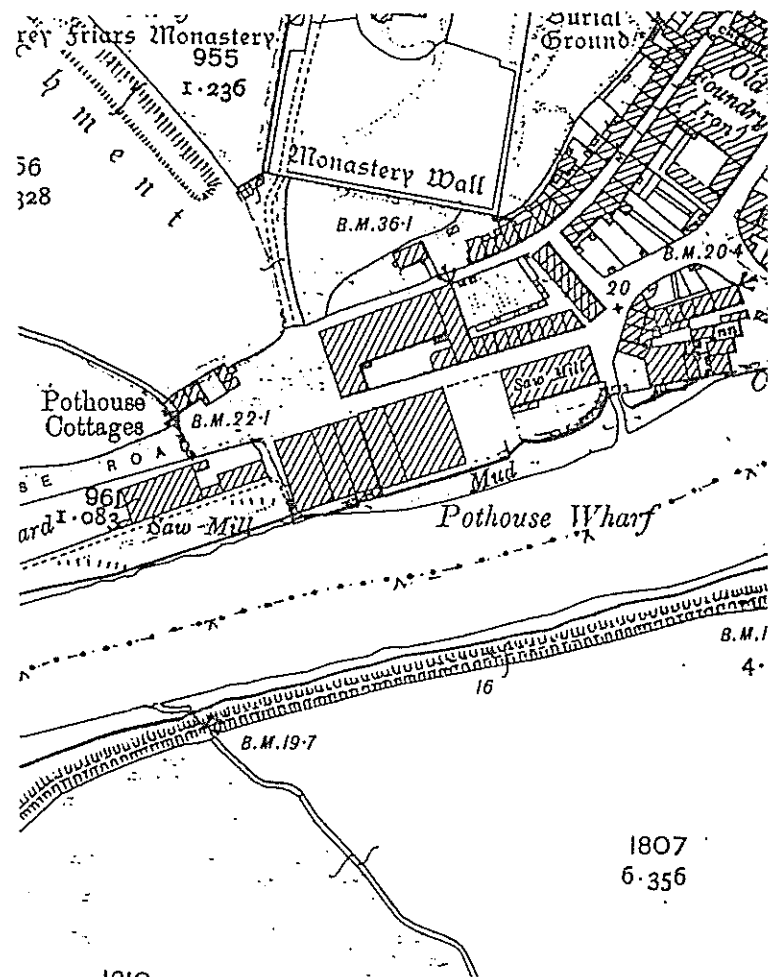
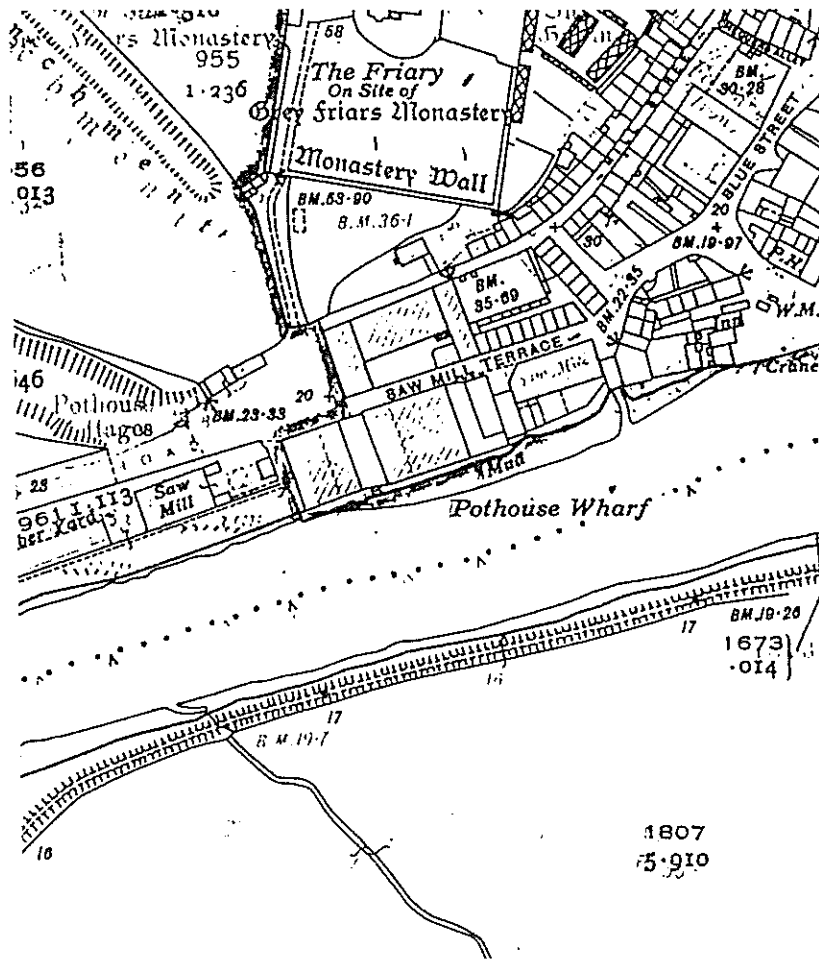
Tracing of part of "Original Drawing of Carmarthen" 1850 (CRO)

40' to inch





OS Second Edition 1:2,500 map and revision of 1936



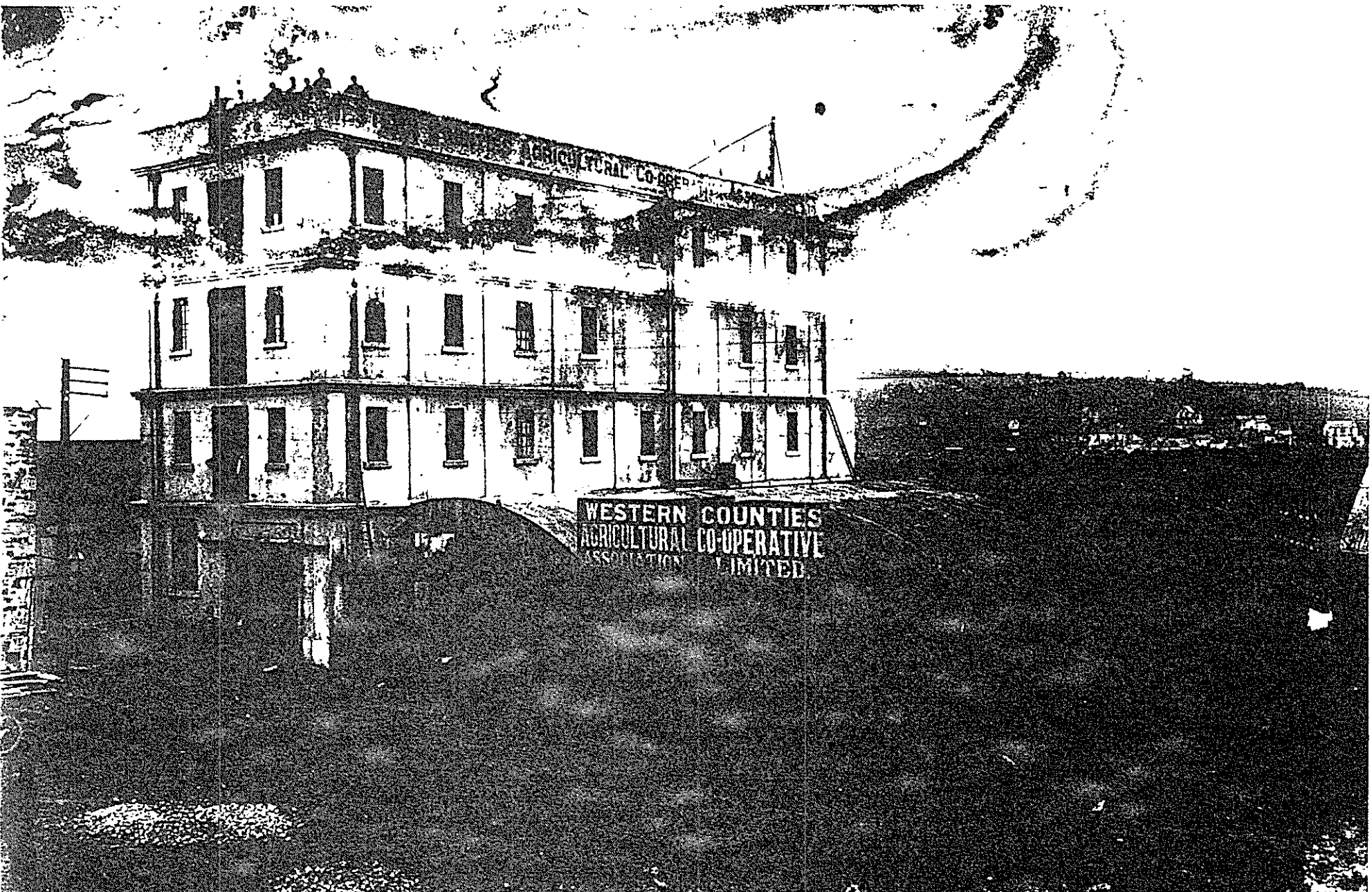
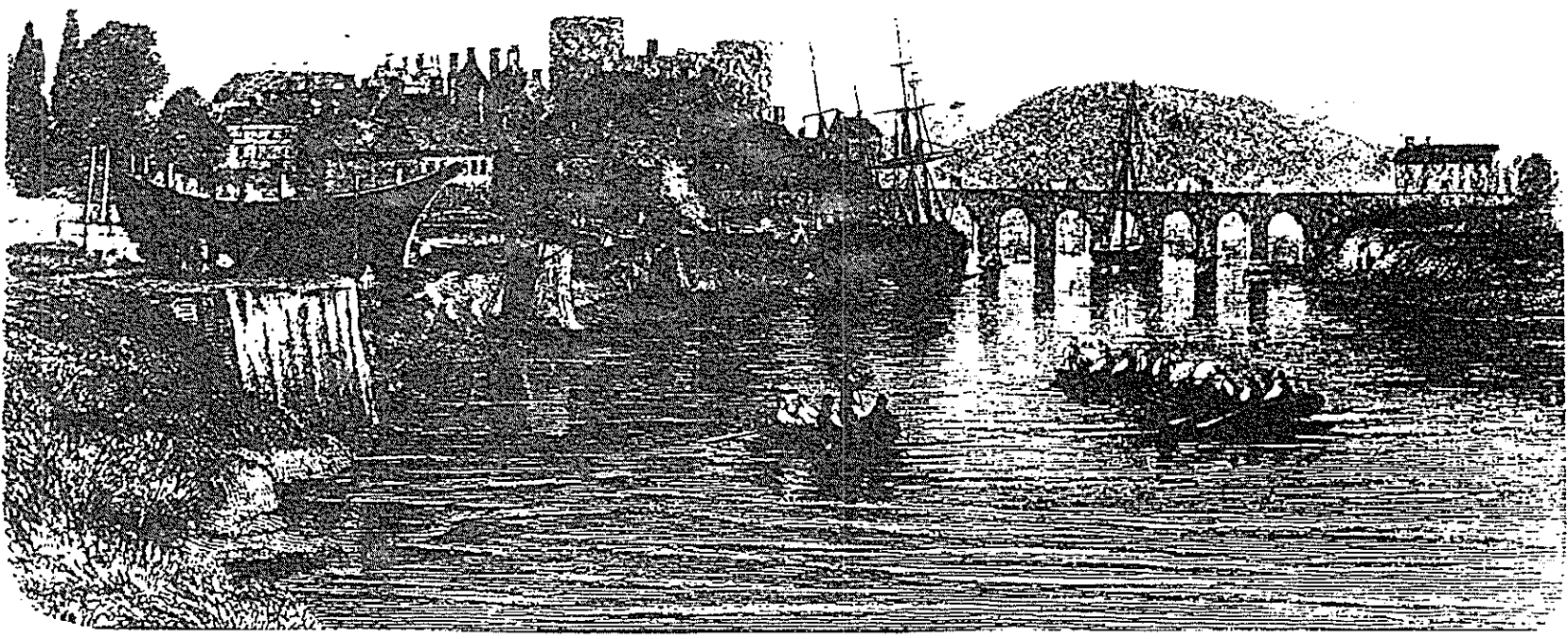
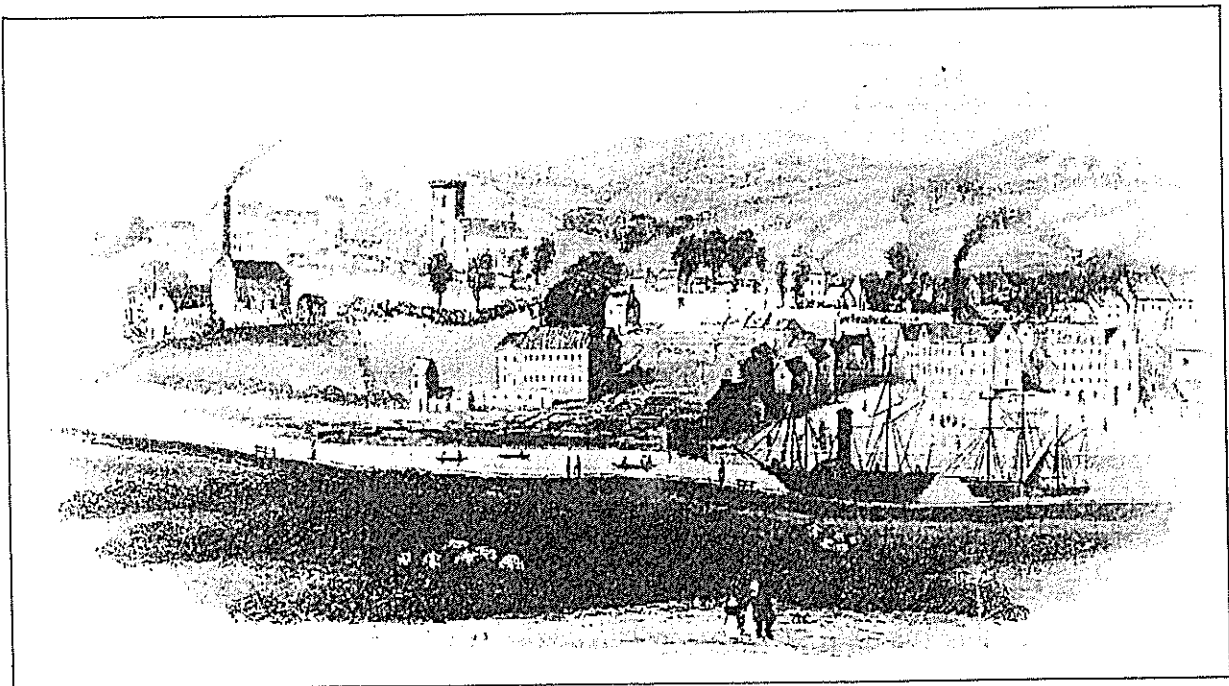


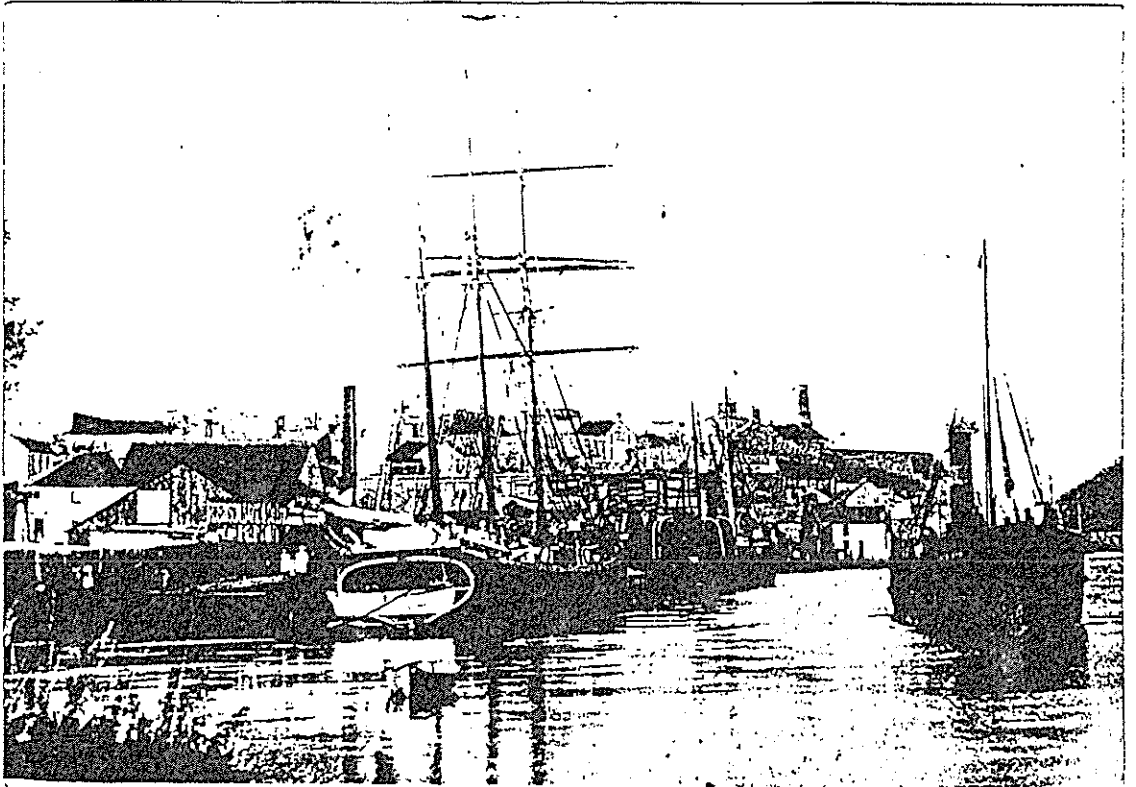
Photo of WCA building and the truncated corrugated storehouses after 1905 (NLW).



Cox's engraving of the Quay c. 1830.



Pothouse Wharf in its heyday - during construction of the WCA building.



Pothouse wharf c. 1880 (the Pothouse is on the left)

